TEACHING THE CULTURE OF LIFE:

The Ultimate Gift

A Culture of Life Studies movie review

Note to parents

• Some of the characters lead misguided lifestyles (implied adultery, excessive drinking, smoking, etc.), but this is clearly shown as wrong.
• Mild Language: BS, screw you, this is hell
• There is brief thematic violence in Ecuador as well as an intense situation involving hostages.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Brainstorm the following question before viewing the film: If someone were to give you “the ultimate gift,” what would it be?

STORY SUMMARY

After his grandfather’s death, Jason Stevens is given the chance to inherit “the ultimate gift,” but only if he follows a series of instructions. If Jason fails any of the tasks given to him, he forfeits the “ultimate gift.” A playboy who has always known wealth, Jason balks at the idea of following his grandfather’s plan in order to inherit an undisclosed amount of money.

Despite his misgivings, Jason relents and begins the first set of tasks on a ranch in Texas where he learns the meaning of work. As the tasks progress, Jason finds himself homeless and in need of true friends who value him as a person. In order to meet one of the task requirements, Jason halfheartedly befriends two people he meets in the park, Alexia and her daughter Emily. As Jason progresses through the tasks, he finds himself experiencing a change of heart. While in Ecuador, Jason discovers the place where his father died and struggles to understand why he should forgive his grandfather. Captured and imprisoned by drug lords, Jason fears for his life and tries to escape, only to find that his conscience will no longer let him be self-serving.

Jason returns to the United States with a newfound desire to help other people fulfill their dreams. At the end of the film, Jason is reminded of the need for forgiveness and the importance of serving others. Jason receives the ultimate gift, but only when he understands that the ultimate gift is more valuable than money and riches.
LIFE THEME: LIFE IS THE ULTIMATE GIFT

Life is the ultimate gift. Without life, man cannot have liberty, happiness, wealth, friends, family, laughter, or dreams. In *The Ultimate Gift*, Jason realizes the inestimable value of life through the lives of his friends, Alexia and Emily. Alexia reveals that Emily was the “best decision” she had ever made. Like many women who choose life for their unexpected children, Alexia can’t imagine her life without her daughter, despite all the pain and suffering she has had because of Emily’s illness. Alexia understands the gift of life, even if she cannot understand why her child must die at such a young age. Because of her previous mistakes in life, Alexia is able to minister to Jason and to help him continue on the right path toward forgiveness of his family and an understanding of God’s plan for his life.

Alexia’s daughter Emily has a rare gift for seeing the truth in people’s lives. With death so close to her, she understands the urgency and need to protect all life. Emily’s view of heaven (filled with butterflies and the thought that God paints the colors on butterflies with His fingers) shows her trust in the Creator. Emily’s vision of heaven is beautiful and filled with life; for Emily, death is not an end, but a beginning of eternal life. Emily sees suffering and death not as a curse, but as a path to being with God.

The euthanasia and “right to die” movement would see Emily’s case as an unfulfilled life and a waste of existence, but Emily uses all the time that she has left trying to make other people happy, even doing things that terrify her (such as horseback riding). Emily is a gift to those around her. While her family is deeply saddened by her death, Emily inspires hope and joy in those she leaves behind. Emily realizes how God is using her life and her death to help the people she is leaving behind.

HOW CAN I APPLY THIS TO MY LIFE?

In *The Ultimate Gift*, Emily shows the great value of human life by spending her short time on earth helping others. Instead of being selfish, Emily uses her life to do good for those around her—especially her mom and Jason. Through her example, Jason learns the sacredness of life.

How can you show others the value of the gift of life? Actions speak louder than words. Think about how you treat other people. Your whole manner should show respect for the dignity of every human being, recognizing that each person is a gift uniquely created by God for a special purpose. The next time you’re tempted to gossip or treat someone with less respect than he deserves, remember that he is loved by God for all eternity.

How can you be successful? Emily did not appear to accomplish very much in her short earthly life other than being sick, but because of her encouragement and joyful spirit, she inspired Jason to help families with sick children. Success isn’t measured by money, but by how many people you can inspire to work for the greater glory of God.

CATHOLIC CONNECTIONS

While the chapel in St. Catherine’s hospital only has a statue in it, Emily goes there often to “be with God.” Why is prayer so important to combatting hopelessness? Find a litany or prayer to the Sacred Heart to say with your family.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Was there really no one at Red’s funeral who came because they genuinely appreciated Red?
   Not really. Of the entire crowd of mourners, there were just two people who appreciated Red. Emily and
her mother went to Red’s funeral to pay their respects and to show their gratitude for the Stevens’ wing at the hospital where Emily receives treatment.

How does the opening scene show the contrast between Red’s friends who care and his family who doesn’t care about him?
The contrast between Red’s friends and relatives and Emily is shown by Emily’s pink umbrella in a sea of black umbrellas. Emily’s umbrella is a vibrant color because she understands what it means to be alive, and she understands the meaning of death. She takes a moment to appreciate the rain, while Red’s family grumbles that the rain was probably arranged by him from heaven.

2. What is materialism and greed?
Materialism and greed focus on money and possessions, lifting them up above everything else in life. Greed forces people to idolize money.

What does materialism do to people?
People who are greedy and materialistic are selfish. Their greatest desire is to obtain more things, never being satisfied with the things that they have.

What does Red Stevens mean when he says “you can’t really begin to live until you’ve lost everything”?
Losing everything instills thankfulness for life and the things that you have. Red teaches Jason humility and gratitude, making him rely on other people for his basic needs, even friendship.

3. At the beginning of the film, does Jason have any true friends?
Jason thinks he has a lot of friends, but in reality all of his friends just want his money.

How does he remind his “friends” that they should help him?
Jason calls all of his friends to remind them that they “owe” him, and he lists all of the monetary gifts that he had given them over the past year.

What do Alexia and Emily teach Jason about true friendship?
Alexia and Emily teach Jason that true friends cannot be bought and sold. Friendship, or any relationship, should never be based on “what I can get” from someone. Friendship is a mutual self-sacrifice made out of love for the other person.

4. Red tells Jason in the video message: “Our lives should be lived not avoiding problems but welcoming them as challenges that will strengthen us so that we can be victorious in the future.” How can you welcome challenges in everyday life? Is the acceptance of problems something that you can cultivate overnight?
You can welcome the challenges in everyday life through daily sacrifices and mortifications. If you can discipline yourself in small matters, you will be training yourself to have discipline in bigger matters. Patience and fortitude are not virtues that are obtained overnight; they require a lifetime of practice and dedication.

5. In prison, Jason’s guide quotes from several books. How do these two quotations teach Jason about forgiveness of his father and grandfather, as well as about the value of life?
• “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.” (A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens)
• “Nor love thy Life, nor hate; but what thou livst / Live well, how long or short permit to Heav’n: / And now prepare thee for another sight.” (Paradise Lost by John Milton, Book 11, 555)
The Dickens quotation could refer to all of the decisions that Jason’s family has made over the years. Some of the decisions were wise, but others were foolish. This quotation tries to help Jason understand that his family is human and in need of forgiveness.

The quotation from *Paradise Lost* helps Jason to recognize that he has only one life to live—that he is not the one who decides when he will live or when he will die. Therefore, it is up to Jason to do as much good as he can in the short life that he has been given by God.

**“JUST FOR FUN” BONUS ACTIVITIES FOR FURTHER LEARNING AND EXPLORATION**

Think about what you would do if you received two billion dollars right now. Be honest with yourself and think about how you might spend it. What might you have to do to change your heart in order to not be consumed with greed like Jason’s family?